

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

7. Wednesday 23 May: morning

The main scheduled business for today is the report of the Church and Society Council. The Convenor, the Revd Richard Frazer, began by quoting Margaret Thatcher who, as Prime Minister, addressed the Assembly 30 years ago in what became known as the “Sermon on the Mound”. She said on that occasion that “abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy that derives from the very nature of creation”. Mr Frazer quoted the retort of writer Jonathan Raban who said that “abundance is not the Biblical alternative to poverty; *sufficiency* is”. At a time when the rich get richer, the poor increasingly live in degraded circumstances, said Mr Frazer, “the time is right to embrace a theology of ‘sufficiency’ and begin more closely to align our actions and priorities with our Kingdom values”. He exhorted commissioners to “be the change we want to see”: “Now is the time to embrace newness and put our money, our energy and our passion into the work of helping bring about a world of justice, peace, hope and healing for the earth”.

This is the focus of the Church and Society Council – but its working brief is enormously wide-ranging. This year’s report covers topics as diverse as faith-driven investment; community-driven “participatory budgeting”; nuclear disarmament; refugees; Europe; devolution; the NHS in its 70th year; and investing in Scotland’s young people. Some of this will be reflected in this summary; more will be contained in our follow-up this evening.

In his speech, the Convenor touched on many of the Council’s concerns and initiatives but highlighted work being taken forward by churches in local situations. He spoke of the value in hosting a participatory budgeting event that brings a community together, in providing a welcome for refugees, and “just being there to overcome loneliness”. He mentioned that politicians in Aberdeen recently were “left buzzing” when they heard about the amazing work being done by churches in their communities. This was one of the many events being encouraged by the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office who have been facilitating Meet Your MSP – and, now, Meet you MP – opportunities.

Mr Frazer spoke about Europe. He said that withdrawal from the EU “will have an enormous impact on the nature of our relations with European partners”. He also expressed profound concern about the UK’s treatment of refugees and asylum seekers – we must “call to account the Home Office for its embarrassing policy of creating an actively hostile environment”, he said.

The deliverance includes a section urging that, if the business plans of oil and gas companies are not aligned with the Paris climate agreement within two years, the Church of Scotland Investors Trust and Pension Trustees should withdraw from investing in them. This is one aspect of the Council's wider emphasis on what it calls "faith consistent investing" in which both businesses and individuals "take account of the needs of creation and financial activity that supports the poorest in our communities". Mr Frazer highlighted the Council's ongoing work with the Islamic Finance Council UK and discussion about Edinburgh becoming a global hub for faith consistent investment. He noted the recent launch of a local not-for-profit credit union in Leith, initiated by the Revd Ian May, a former banker.

The Church of Scotland has a long involvement in education in Scotland. One of the aims of the Scottish Reformers was to establish a school in every parish in the land. It had the profound effect of putting ordinary children on a more equal footing with the children of the rich. Today, said Mr Frazer, in a multi-culturalist, pluralist society, educational opportunities pass many children by. Over the past two years, the Council's Education Review Group has concluded that, for the Church, cross council cooperation is the way forward. The Council is proposing a new Young People and Education Action Group that will work collaboratively to establish a "virtuous circle of support and nurture in early years".

"We might wonder", the Convenor concluded, "what is holding the world together in these times of danger, uncertainty and fear. I'd like to suggest it is places of faith and hope, places of community and hospitality, places where people have the courage to see that for people of resurrection hope, death is never the last word. In spite of everything, sometimes in spite of ourselves, newness is happening in the churches as the hope we sometimes feel seems to have deserted us seizes hold of us."

The Revd Andrew Moore said that his son had asked about The Children's Lottery – "Is that for me?" He expressed concern about the dramatic rise in gambling and gambling advertising, including online. He wondered whether the Assembly should call for a gambling advertising ban and- consider an online gambling ban – for the sake of the struggling. The Convenor responded that in 2014 the Assembly did call for a ban on gambling advertising at sporting events and work is ongoing with partner churches in particular on fixed-odds betting. "This is a menace," he said.

An American minister – nervous, she said, but passionate, and serving in Ullapool, wanted the Assembly to recognise what good Kingdom work is being done in local communities. The Convenor asked commissioners to fill in cards naming magic things happening in their communities.

Much of the rest of the morning was spent debating whether or not the Church of Scotland should support disinvestment from the oil and gas industry.

A minister said that he felt a bit of a hypocrite because some of his Church of Scotland pension investments are with fossil fuels and Nestlé. He asked whether the Church could offer him an ethical pension. Bishop Timothy Ravinder said that the Church of South India has had ecological concerns for over twenty years, born out of the serious challenges that the country faces from climate change. He spoke of “shocking incidences of farmers driven to suicide because of debt and despair caused by crop failures.” He pleaded with the Church of Scotland to change its development policies. An elder said the cost of environmentally friendly products is much greater than many throw-away equivalents. How can we as a Church provide refreshments that are both economical *and* bio-degradable? We need a compromise, she said, but also to put pressure on manufacturers.

The Revd Jennifer Adams, bringing a counter-motion, said there should be no “if” about it, as the Council had proposed. She argued that the companies are showing no signs of aligning with the Paris Climate Agreements. There’s a moral imperative to remove these investments, she said, and direct them instead towards companies that *are* aligned. She added that if there are financial risks in disinvestment, there are also risks in remaining invested in companies that will be affected by inevitable changes in policies.

Bringing an alternative counter-motion, the Very Revd Albert Bogle asked for “practicality”. He said that we would get a headline for disinvestment but that by *continuing* to invest in oil and gas companies, the Church can continue to seek their alignment with the Parish Climate Agreement. “Let’s be the thorn in the flesh of oil companies,” he said.

In the ensuing debate on the Council’s motion and the two counter-motions, a delegate from the United Reformed Church (URC) said that it has a policy of positive engagement. “If we do not engage, then these companies are surrounded by people and companies that have no interest in climate change,” he said. The URC keeps talking to the companies they feel are still listening to them; otherwise they disinvest.

“Market forces are already swinging in favour of renewable energy”, said one minister, whose own church is solar powered. “It’s time to take the lead and get our money out.” A former convenor of the Council said that one person every second is displaced by the impact of climate change. *This* is the wider cost of investment in oil and gas to our global sisters and brothers, she said. The return on disinvestment will be to give back to our children a planet in better shape. You don’t have to invest in a company to still engage with it, she argued.

An Aberdeen minister said his manse lies under the flight path of helicopters supporting the oil industry – an industry that fuels our economy, he said. He wanted commissioners to maintain investment in the industry because much good comes as a result of it. He proposed “continual engagement and loving correction”.

A Youth Delegate said that at a Youth Assembly debate a few years back, over two-thirds of the delegates voted for disinvestment, either full or partial.

The debate continued after a break, with many contributions both for and against disinvestment from the oil industry.

An Elder from Malta said that she was shocked that the church was investing companies that, she said, bury their waste products in the Sahara Desert. Another asked what percentage Church of Scotland investments into the oil and gas industries represent of the whole. Pleading for the same sense of urgency demonstrated in response to the Council of Assembly’s proposed Strategic Plan, another commissioner said, “We’re well into the eleventh hour; let’s not sleepwalk past midnight.” Mrs Isobel Hunter emphasised that the same companies that have the expertise to develop oil and gas have the expertise and self-*interest* to develop low carbon energy. The picture is grey, not black and white, she said. “We shouldn’t walk away from them in order to feel good.”

One commissioner asked, “What care do we have for those who work in the oil industry?” A former employee in the oil industry said that “we *do* have influence” and added that a number of companies are sticking closely to their emissions limits. Let us focus our efforts on those that don’t, he said. Another commissioner said the problem is demand, not supply; oil companies don’t make the cars we use or build the houses and churches we live and worship in. “So why do we make them the bogey men?” he asked. “We shouldn’t lose our voice”, said another.

In summarising the debate, Mr Bogle said that individuals make a difference – it’s better to “eyeball” people, speak to them and challenge them to convince them to change. The Convenor said that we’ve been addicted to the oil industry for many years and we need to ween ourselves off it. “You can disagree with a policy without demonizing those who have to implement it.” After much engagement with industry, it is now time for the General Assembly to make a decision, he said. The decision it *made* was to accept Mr Bogle’s counter-motion calling for continuing engagement with the industry and not to disinvest.

The practice of listening and engagement was then picked up in a discussion about “doing politics differently”. Joanna Cherry MP was visiting the Assembly with a minister in her ward. Minister, congregation and MP keep in supportive conversation, the minister said. (And incidentally, Ms

Cherry had commented to him that the quality of debate this morning rather exceeded that she often encounters in the debating chamber she's normally in!)

The Very Revd Dr Alan Macdonald stood to support the Council's congratulations of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He said that it was interesting to hear so many younger people in ICAN saying: "Having nuclear weapons is not normal. It's only a few countries that have them. Why?" Another commissioner brought an addendum protesting against asylum policies that force immigrants and asylum seekers into destitution. The policies are unjust, exploitative and causing suffering to the most vulnerable and voiceless in our nation. He wanted, for example, the social services to be actively guided on their legal duties. The addendum was passed.

After a conversation about protecting the rights of EU nationals and UK citizens working in the EU, the Assembly adjourned for lunch. It will reconvene for an Order of the Day, The Moderator's Shield and Medals, before returning to the Council's report.